Synopsis

Mysticism, derived from the Greek word *mystikos*, may be defined as the pursuit of communion with or conscious awareness of a higher reality through direct experience, intuition or insight. The word 'personality' is derived from the Latin word *persona* which means 'mask'. This indicates that the essence of a human being lies behind his personality. The mystic experience is also the direct perception of the essence beneath the layers of one's own ephemeral individual personality. Recognizing that the medium of prose is insufficient to give adequate expression to their ineffable experience, mystics often turn to poetry. Mystic poets present a glimpse of the world through their eyes. This vision is radically different from common perception. The ineffable experience of the mystic cuts across all barriers of religion, race, language, caste, creed and nationality. The bliss of the mystic experience lies far beyond the realm of words. *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* is an anthology of mystical poems spanning the last eight hundred years. In his poem *The Rapture*, the 17th century English poet Thomas Traherne gives a hint of this experience:

> O Heavenly Joy!
> O great and sacred blessedness
> Which I possess!
> So great a joy
> Who did into my arms convey? (*The Oxford Book* 68)

Sri Ramana Maharshi is widely known as one of the greatest sages and mystics of the twentieth century. Sri Ramana's poems are deeply intertwined with his mystic experience. It is his sublime inner experience that finds utterance in the form of his poems. Since ancient times, Arunachala, the mountain at Tiruvannamalai, has been

considered as a symbol of the mystic experience. Down the ages, this mountain has served as the abode of many sages. At the age of sixteen, Sri Ramana had a profound mystic experience, which was the outcome of a deep inner enquiry. The call of Arunachala came a few weeks later. In his poem *Akshara Mana Malai*, Sri Ramana writes:

> The moment I thought of your name,
> you caught and drew me to yourself.
> Who can know the greatness
> of your grace, O Arunachala? (70)

The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi is a compendium of all the poetic and prose works of Sri Ramana Maharshi. The poems of Sri Ramana are enchanting in style and universal in spirit. There is no narrow sectarianism in his poetry. Sri Ramana has composed original poems in four different languages: Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Sanskrit. Sri Ramana did not compose his mystic poems in the usual sense of the term. The theme of the poems and often even the words of the verses came to him spontaneously. At times, he even tried not to bother with the poem, but the words would not be suppressed, and simply flowed into him and through him to find utterance. In Sri Ramana's mystic poems, there is a rich use of symbolism and imagery to portray the spiritual journey.

The earliest mystic and philosophical poems known to humanity today are the Upanishads. Composed several millennia ago by the ancient sages of India, the Upanishads have been treasured and handed from generation to generation. The theme of the Upanishads is the quest for absolute reality. In the thoughtful and contemplative

minds of the ancient sages of India, there arose many fundamental questions about life. These fundamental questions are timeless in their appeal, and relevant in every age to anyone who seeks a deeper understanding of life. Many of the Upanishads are in the form of a dialogue between a student and a sage.

The Upanishads are the cornerstones of the philosophy of *Advaita. Advaita* literally means 'not two'. The key message of this philosophy is that consciousness is the underlying substratum of the world perceived through the senses. This philosophy states that this underlying substratum of pure consciousness is one and indivisible. The various living beings that exist in the world may be compared to waves that appear and disappear in the ocean of consciousness. Consciousness is the imperishable reality behind all perishable forms perceived in the world. This philosophy also states that the true essence of a human being is hidden by the various layers of personality, and therefore a quest becomes necessary to gain Self-knowledge. The philosophy of *Advaita* provides a conceptual framework and serves as the basis for interpreting the poems of Sri Ramana Maharshi.

The important philosophical poems composed by Sri Ramana are *Ulladu Narpadu, Upadesa Saram, Anma Viddai*, *Appalam Pattu* and *Ekatma Panchakam*. The first major theme in Sri Ramana's poems is *Advaita.* In this aspect, Sri Ramana's view of the underlying reality is in complete accord with the vision of the Upanishads as interpreted by philosophy of *Advaita*. Interestingly, Sri Ramana had not formally studied any philosophy and his insights were based on his own direct mystic experience. The second major theme in Sri Ramana's poems is *Atma Vichara,* a direct enquiry into the nature of the Self. It is here that Sri Ramana takes a novel approach as compared to

traditional schools of *Advaita* philosophy. In his poem titled *Upadesa Saram*, Sri Ramana says:

> The mind is nothing but a lot of thoughts,
> Of all these many thoughts 'tis the thought 'I'
> That is the root. So we can see by that
> The mind in truth is only the thought 'I'. (18)

Upon waking from sleep, the first thought to arise is the thought 'I'. It is only after the emergence of the 'I-thought', that other thoughts can arise. All thoughts are related either explicitly or implicitly to the 'I-thought', and may be considered as offshoots of the primary 'I-thought'. Sri Ramana points out the importance of enquiring into the source of the 'I-thought' by diving deep within oneself. This is the essence of the practice of Self-enquiry, which Sri Ramana advocated as the most direct and effective path to discovering the underlying reality.

> Whence, therefore, does this 'I-thought' have its birth?
> With vigilant and ever active mind
> Seek this, and crestfallen the 'I' becomes.
> The search, itself, the quest of Wisdom is. (19)

The quest to experientially discover the source of the thought 'I' is termed as *Atma Vichara*. When sustained attention is directed inwards, a moment comes when the true Self, which has none of the limitations of the apparent self, stands revealed. Sri Ramana says, "What is the use of knowing about everything else when you do not yet know who you are? Men avoid this enquiry into the true Self, but what else is there so worthy to be undertaken?" (Osborne 12)

The state where thought disappears in complete wakefulness lies beyond the three states of waking, dream and deep-sleep. This state combines the awareness of the waking state with the stillness of the deep sleep state. The Upanishads have termed this state as *Turiya* to distinguish it from the three states of waking, dream and deep-sleep. It is through this direct experience that man recognizes his true Self, which is pure consciousness. The actual quest is performed by diving deep within oneself, in the way a diver seeks a pearl hidden in the depths of the sea. In his poem titled *Ulladu Narpadu*, Sri Ramana writes:

> Search in the mind by quest of 'Who am I?'
> And this way reach the Heart.
> That moment come,
> The ego will fall down and in its place
> The one 'I-I' will instantly appear.
> Yet this is not the ego but is found
> To be the blazing of the Absolute. (30)

It is then recognized that the unchanging and therefore imperishable pure consciousness is the true Self, the essence that lies beneath the layers of the human personality. Pure consciousness is also the underlying substratum of the three states of waking, dream and deep-sleep. The emphasis on Self-enquiry as the direct means to discover the true Self is the most distinctive motif in Sri Ramana's poems.

The third major theme in Sri Ramana's poems is Arunachala. Since ancient times, the mountain of Arunachala has been regarded as a symbol of divinity. Sri Ramana Maharshi composed five hymns on Arunachala: *Arunachala Akshara Mana Malai*, *Nava*

Mani Malai, Arunachala Padikam, Arunachala Ashtakam, Arunachala Pancha Ratnam. Collectively these five hymns are known as *Arunachala Stuti Panchakam*. Sri Ramana's love towards Arunachala was all-consuming. He was drawn to Arunachala in 1896 at the age of sixteen by an inexorable power. Subsequently, Sri Ramana did not leave the vicinity of his beloved mountain even for a single day for the next fifty four years, until his mortal frame merged with Arunachala in 1950.

Akshara Mana Malai is the first and the longest of Sri Ramana's poems. The hundred and eight verses of the poem begin with the successive letters of the Tamil alphabet. In this poem, Arunachala is portrayed in myriad ways: as the bliss of mystic experience, as a loving mother, as a silent teacher who bestows spiritual wisdom and as the manifest form of divine grace. However, bridal mysticism is the predominant metaphor, with the individual soul depicted as the bride and the Arunachala as the bridegroom. *Akshara Mana Malai* means 'The Bridal Garland of Letters' and this poem reflects the longing of the soul for union with the Lord. The final verse of this hymn is an apt conclusion with the imagery of exchange of garlands with Arunachala. The exchange of garlands is a traditional practice in India that symbolizes the marital union of the bride and the bridegroom.

In *Nava Mani Malai,* Ramana Maharshi says that Arunachala symbolizes the great declaration in the Upanishads*:*

> Not only do A, RU and NA stand for
> Being, Awareness and Bliss,
> they also stand for the Self, the soul and their oneness.
> Hence Aruna means but that thou art.

Achala is perfection firm. (2)

The *Chandogya Upanishad* declares "*Tat Tvam Asi"* which means "That Thou Art". (6:9) *'Tat'* refers to the transcendent reality; *'Tvam'* refers to the individual being. This profound declaration proclaims the essential oneness of the individual being with the absolute, eternal reality. The essence of both the individual being and the transcendent reality is absolute existence, consciousness and bliss. Sri Ramana says that Arunachala signifies the firm abidance in the recognition of this non-duality. The following verse in the same poem points to the state of complete surrender to the divine will.

You took sole charge of my spirit and my body.
What more do I want? Merit or defect,
I know none apart from you.
My very life you are.
Do with me what you will. (7)

In *Arunachala Padikam*, Sri Ramana takes the standpoint of a spiritual seeker who is longing for the mystic experience. A frog which clings to the stem of the lotus can neither appreciate the beauty of the lotus flower, nor taste its sweet nectar. In utter humility, Sri Ramana says that he is at the feet of Arunachala, 'like a frog clinging to the stem of a lotus plant'. He longs to be a 'honeybee' which sucks the nectar of bliss that arises from the mystic experience.

If I died while yet clinging to your Feet,
It would be a standing pillar of disgrace for you,
O blazing light of Aruna Hill,
Expanse of Grace more subtle than the ether! (6)

Sri Ramana says that if he were to perish without reaching the goal of spiritual fulfillment, it would be a monument of disgrace for Arunachala. In his next poem *Arunachala Ashtakam*, Sri Ramana expresses several profound philosophical and mystical insights.

Meditating without thought
On Your formless Being,
My form dissolves like a sugar-doll in the sea.
And when I realize who I am,
What being have I apart from You,
O, You who stand as the mighty Aruna Hill? (3)

The formless being of the Lord is pure awareness. Through meditation on the formless being in silent absorption transcending thought, the true Self is discovered. The duality of the perceiver and the perceived vanishes in this experience. Sri Ramana says that to search for God ignoring the pure consciousness that shines as one's essential being is only a sign of ignorance. Such a futile search is 'like looking, lamp in hand, for darkness.' (4) *Arunachala Ashtakam* concludes with the following verse:

The raindrops showered down
By the clouds risen from the sea,
Cannot rest until they reach,
Despite all hindrance,
Once again their ocean home. (8)

Just as the raindrop returns to the ocean, even so the individual being must return to its source. This verse communicates the same insight as the following verse of the

Mundaka Upanishad: "As from the flaming fire, thousands of sparks, similar to its nature issue forth; so from the immortal consciousness, diverse beings originate and they find their way back into it." (2:1) Sri Ramana also gives the example of a bird that may hover for a while in the sky, but must 'find at last on earth alone its resting place.' (8)

In *Arunachala Pancha Ratnam*, the shortest but perhaps the most profound hymn among the five hymns, Sri Ramana Maharshi presents the essence of the major spiritual paths by which an aspirant may reach his goal. In the final verse of this poem, Sri Ramana says:

> He who, with Heart to you surrendered,
> Beholds for ever you alone,
> Sees all things as forms of you
> And loves and serves them as none other
> Than the Self, O Aruna Hill,
> Triumphs because he is immersed
> In you whose being is pure bliss. (5)

What is the relevance of the Sri Ramana's poems in the modern age of science and technology? While the rapid development of new technologies has solved a number of problems and enriched our lives in many ways, it has also opened up a Pandora's Box of unprecedented challenges. In *Be Still, It Is The Wind That Sings,* Arthur Osborne writes that modern man may claim to be less gullible than his ancestors, but he has "only fallen into another form of it" as he is "duped by the utterly untenable suggestion that contentment can be achieved by the constant satisfaction of constantly created new

needs." (334) Mystics such as Sri Ramana say that the pursuit of happiness is not wrong but the source of happiness is within.

The perceived universe, the unseen cause of the universe and one's own self constitute the three primary aspects of life seen in its totality. While religion typically begins with faith in the existence of an omniscient and omnipotent God as the unseen cause of the universe, science attempts to investigate the perceived physical universe in order to discover reality. The third approach, which is different from both the above two approaches, is to investigate the reality of one's own self. What, really, is this 'I'? This investigation is called Self-enquiry. In doing so, one starts with that which is immediately available to every human being. Just as in scientific research, the objective is to discover the truth. Every human being has three essential aspects or modes of expressions: being, thinking and doing. Of these three aspects, 'being' is the most fundamental. However, conscious attention is rarely directed at this aspect; usually it is thinking and doing that is considered important and given much attention. In Self-enquiry, conscious attention is directed at the 'being' aspect.

Recent discoveries in science have much in common with mystic insights. Science has proved that the assumption that a thing exists exactly as it appears is incorrect. One of the major advances in science in the twentieth century has been the development of Quantum Physics, which explores phenomena at the sub-atomic level. One of the most important discoveries of this branch of science is the startling discovery that elementary particles such as the electron exhibit not only particle-like properties, but also wave-like properties. At this level, the solidity of a particle dissolves into patterns of probabilities and a network of interconnections. Through careful enquiry and research,

the scientist attempts to discover the reality that lies beneath appearances. So too, the mystic directs his attention inwards and seeks to discover the reality that lies beneath appearances.

Mystics such as Sri Ramana tell us that the appearance of multiplicity is only at superficial level that has its utility for transactional purposes but no fundamental reality. The nature of reality that is intuitively perceived by mystics is also being discovered by science. In *Wherever You Go, There You Are,* Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writes, "Everything we are in contact with connects us to the whole world in each moment. … We have climbed to a vantage point from which we can more readily perceive wholeness." (214) From the vantage point of the mystic, this wholeness is evident. The insights of the mystics foster universal human values and qualities such as compassion and ecological sensitiveness. Therefore, these insights have the potential to transform the world into a more peaceful place and provide some solutions to the problems of modern man.

The crisis that humanity faces today can also be an opportunity for a more balanced and harmonious pattern of development that includes the inner life of man. The Upanishads declare "*Atmanam Viddi*" - "Know thyself". This very same aphorism was inscribed in the forecourt of the temple of Apollo at Delphi in ancient Greece, and has fascinated great thinkers and philosophers such as Socrates and Plato. The paramount importance of the quest to know one's real Self is the main message of Sri Ramana Maharshi and the central theme of his poems.